

## Long-Ignored Civil War Cemetery to Become Memorial

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Story by Jimmy Scarano

For more than 60 years, Freedmen's Cemetery, a Civil War-era burial ground in Alexandria, Va., was covered by a gas station and two-story office building built in the 1950s. Last week, those buildings were demolished to make way for a memorial that will commemorate the 1,800 runaway slaves buried there between 1864 and 1868.

On May 12, the site will be officially rededicated as Freedmen's Memorial Park, where 1,800 handmade luminaries will honor the people buried there.

"We expect a substantial turnout," says Audrey Davis, Assistant director and curator of the Alexandria Black History Museum. "It's a very special event, especially for those of us who've been involved."



Archaeologists excavate in the gas station parking lot, site of the Freedmen's Cemetery. (Alexandria Archaeology)

The effort to rededicate the site as a memorial began in 1997, when local residents first learned of the existence of the cemetery through Washington Post article. The old cemetery was in the way of the construction of the Wilson Bridge, a multi-million dollar project still in progress today. Locals who were trying to stop the bridge from being built began to take an interest in the cemetery, and as its history was uncovered, two women decided something needed to be done.

"We wanted to bring attention to it and see it restored," says Lillie Finklea, who along with her friend Louise Massoud, founded the nonprofit Friends of the Freedmen's Cemetery in 1997. Finklea says they were just "two little ladies who had no idea what was going to happen."

Finklea and Massoud started writing letters, making phone calls, and doing everything they could to let the community know about the cemetery. They held a memorial service in front of the gas station and began researching the names of all the people buried at the site, about half of which are children.

"The key was keeping it out there so that people were hearing about it," Finklea says.

In 1999 the Alexandria Black History Museum opened an exhibit on the Freedmen's Cemetery, and the following year a state highway marker was put up near the gas station. But still, the nonprofit's ultimate

goal was to purchase the commercial properties and build a memorial. The only issue was where the money was going to come from.

In 2002, the city decided to use \$5.5 million of the mitigation money from the Wilson Bridge Project to buy the properties and build a memorial.

"It was an amazing city performance," Finklea says. "The whole city embraced it, and I'm grateful to the city officials and all the citizens."

Five years later, the gas station and office building are finally rubble, and there will be a design competition for the memorial park, which is scheduled to be completed by 2010.

"Whatever they decide to do with the memorial, the most important thing to us is those names of the people buried there—that they be written somewhere—because that's all we have," Finklea says.

Many runaway slaves that flooded the union-controlled Alexandria area died due to malnourishment and poor living conditions. After Congress stopped funding the cemetery in 1868, the land changed hands several times, and no one preserved it. By the 1950s the land had been rezoned for commercial use, the wooden grave markers had deteriorated, and a gas station had been built.

Ruth Reeder, an educator at the Alexandria Archaeology Museum, which helped survey the land and has sent countless teams to the property to make sure the graves aren't disturbed, says that locals were surprised to hear of the cemetery's existence. "There was a certain outrage in the community; right across the street is the St. Mary's Catholic cemetery, and that has been perfectly maintained," Reeder says.

Finklea's group is looking forward to Saturday's event. "Things happen, and history happens, and we can correct that now," she says. "If I don't do anything from this day forward, I've done what I set out to do."

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